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ABSTRACT

This document examines approaches to educational reform currently under consideration in the Pacific Northwest and discusses policy issues involved with these reform efforts. The introduction discusses broad-scale policy issues, including the setting of priorities amid the diversity of reforms, the clarifying of beliefs and selection of changes that policymakers truly believe in, the analysis of constraints, and the analysis of consequences stemming from various options. The first major section thereafter discusses issues arising from efforts to increase requirements and raise standards. These issues include establishing the motivation for increasing requirements, uniformity of requirements, locus of control (state or local), clarifying requirements, assessment, nonperformers, and equity. The second major section covers teacher salary reforms, including merit pay, master teacher programs, differentiated staffing, career ladders, and output measures. Issues discussed include policy motivation, projected effect on instructional improvement, and the relative advantages and disadvantages of each approach. (TE)

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POLICY OPTIONS FOR EDUCATION REFORM

A Policy Analysis Paper

Discussion Draft

Prepared for the Chief State School Officers
of the Northwest and Pacific

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POLICY OPTIONS FOR EDUCATION REFORM

Introduction

The Chief State School Officers of the Northwest and Pacific, working through their respective state education agencies, have joined their counterparts throughout the country in taking an active leadership role in education reform--not just in the sense of making changes, but reform specifically directed toward achieving excellence and equity in education.

A quick look at activities underway in the Northwest/Pacific region--including task force and commission studies, legislative proposals and enactments, revisions of old and instigations of new state and local board policies, and changes in administrative and instructional practices at both state and local levels--reveals a very wide variety of approaches to the problems of education reform.

Even more significant is the extensive range of the reform efforts themselves. What are some of the problems being addressed? Just for starters, these:

- Clarification and articulation of educational goals;
- Stringent specifications of curricular requirements;
- Raising of expectations and standards for student performance;
- Standardization of measurement and evaluation requirements;
- Establishment of "effective schooling" programs;
- Institution of discipline codes;
- Integration of modern technologies (including, but by no means limited to the computer) into education;

- Revamping of accreditation procedures and standards;
- Devising of formal cooperative programs with the public, especially business and industry;
- Establishment of education foundations to elicit private sector fiscal support for education;
- Measurement by formal tests and other means, of teacher and administrative performance;
- Drastic reformulation of teacher preparation programs, from initial recruitment and selection, through the preparatory years, to actual certification;
- Introduction of various programs for improving the working conditions and compensation of teachers (greater classroom autonomy, more self-selection in staff development programs, introduction of differentials in staff assignment and salaries, etc.).

This brief listing does not purport to identify all of the kinds of education reform underway in this region, but it does give a good starting place for examining some of the policy issues involved, both broad-scale issues and ones specifically directed to individual types of reform proposals.

Concentrating Efforts

The most striking policy issue would appear to stem from the very diversity of reforms being undertaken all at once in many states: Out of the wealth--or perhaps the morass?--of things that need to be done, how can valid priorities be set? This is a question that has not been nearly so important and frustrating in earlier eras of education reform in America. Before, there has generally emerged one major reform thrust at a time; teaching machines; instructional TV; education of the

disadvantaged; modern math; education for all handicapped children; bilingual education--there's no end to the list. Of course, there was always some temporal and even programmatic overlap in these programs, but a school district or a state education agency had at least a fair chance of staying current by concentrating on not more than two or three "reforms" at the same time. Today, it is not unusual to find a local, a state level, or a national task force suggesting substantial (and difficult and expensive) reforms covering a dozen or more disparate topics, all of which are to be subject to immediate ameliorative action; nor is it unusual to find legislative proposals enacted which require major education reform efforts on a half-dozen fronts at once.

Thus, an initial education reform policy issue would seem quite necessarily to be one of focusing clearly on a very limited number of concerns or a very limited number of steps to be taken covering a broader range of accepted "priorities".

Clarifying Beliefs

A related policy issue, in the light of the far-reaching proposals which are being made to bring about major reforms, is one of selecting the specific changes that the policy-makers really believe in. Some thoughtful analysts of the current education reform movements are suggesting that the education establishment may be led into making changes which on the surface appear to be both popular and "right", but which on further analysis are found to be creating new problems--the vigorous push for quality, for example, threatening to undercut hard-fought struggles for equity.

Analyzing Constraints

A third policy issue involves sorting out the constraints under which education policy must be formed. What are the popular and political pressures which must be borne, and what resisted? What time constraints are real, what fancied? Are ever scarce funds being allocated to new programs to make a splash, rather than to make a difference?

Consequential Analysis

A final policy issue of a general nature concerns the ways of connecting options which may be available to decision-makers with their probable educational results. For example, if a decision-making body is weighing the relative merits of a master teacher program against a differentiated staffing program, what are the ways of estimating the probable results of one as compared to the other--results not only in terms of costs, administrative feasibility, professional and public acceptance, but also in terms of contributions to effective schooling?

Raising some sample policy issues does not solve any problems, but consideration of such issues may be useful at two levels. First, at a very broad level, it may be helpful to remind ourselves that the sudden snowballing of the reform movement, with many proposed reforms gaining almost instant popularity, may have temporarily obscured the complexity of the educational and social problems which the suggested reforms propose to solve. Second, at a much more specific level, it may be useful to select a couple of the major reform efforts underway in the

country--and very notably in this region--and subject them to some somewhat more detailed policy analyses in order to highlight the possible or likely consequences of adopting one policy or another.

Our focus for this purpose may well be on two of the major areas which have, nationwide, become a central part of the overall education reform movement: Increasing requirements and performance standards for students, and breaking the lock-step salary schedule for teachers.

I: Increasing Requirements and Raising Standards

Establishing Motivation

Nearly all of the multitude of national reform reports, and nearly all of the state level responses to the reform movement, have preached the doctrine of higher standards and tougher requirements. The enthusiasm with which this doctrine has been accepted by both the general public and the education profession itself is not surprising. Partly because of the less demanding mood of the sixties and seventies, when all authority was being questioned and the importance of doing one's own thing was emphasized, there is no real doubt that educational expectations and performance had suffered. There is no necessity here of reviewing all of the troublesome arguments about the decline of the scores, or in trying to fix or escape "blame" for what had happened--there seems to be no real doubt that standards had been relaxed, expectations diminished, and performance been allowed to slip. The situation was pretty clear and thoroughly discouraging, and a simple "get tough" revival seemed to be the answer. So, for the good of the youth of America, and for the good of America itself, lower the boom and sock it to 'em!

The previous sentence is, admittedly, a bit hyperbolic, but only a bit. One of the motivations of the public, if not of those charged specifically with educational decision-making, has been to "crack down on the kids" because of a feeling that they have had it too easy, have had

their own way too long, have generally shown little sense of responsibility to society, have frequently goofed off. All of this may be true, but these shortcomings of some or even a good many of the younger generation do not serve as a sound basis for far-reaching educational policy. So the policy-making bodies find themselves asking at the outset, "What is our real motivation for increasing requirements and raising standards?"

For the motivation, as well as the policy itself, has discernible consequences. If the tough policies are, indeed, for the sake of getting tough, what we know of human psychology would indicate that the results will be the reluctant agreement, unwilling acceptance, or outright rebellion on the part of the students. Alternatively, if the toughening up is done solely in response to public pressure, rather than because good educational results can be reasonably forecast, there may nevertheless be engendered enough general public support for education to warrant risking some degree of student resistance or rebellion. But if the policy-makers are fundamentally convinced that higher education and more demanding requirements are actually going to improve student performance and hence advance the life-long welfare of students, then the results of the policy have a much better chance of being successful.

Universal Requirements

Does the policy of higher expectation, standards, and demands assume that the same educational diet is appropriate for all students, as Mortimer Adler has proposed? If so, the policy would seem to have little

chance of operational success, because it would not be likely to meet either the needs of society or the needs of the individual. Society needs a rich variety of members, different in background, training, abilities and interests. Individuals, likewise, are different in a multitude of respects. An educational policy which assumes either a homogenized society or homogenized individuals is likely to be unproductive--or more bluntly, a flat failure.

Locus of Control

Completely uniform educational standards and requirements may not be the panacea that some have believed, and not only for the reasons suggested above. Such uniformity tends to seek authentication and support at the state level; that's the way to make uniformity work in education. But as soon as the entire locus of control, both for the determination and the enforcement of "state standards" and "uniform state requirements" shifts from local boards of education, uniformity may well become stultifying. Granted that there has been, in the course of history of American education, a lot of loose rhetoric and equally loose thinking about the virtues of local control of education, local control does have some virtuous qualities. Any state educational policy of stringent uniformity risks undercutting these--perhaps limited but very real--goods to be found in our system of local policy-making boards of education.

Clarifying Requirements

Another of the policy problems with the "high standards" movement lies in the difficulty of determining and expressing what the requirements and standards really mean. To call for a half-year of

computer science, for example, is essentially meaningless unless time, content, activities and outcomes are very clearly specified. It sometimes appears that the additional requirements for high school graduation, for another example, have not been very thoroughly thought out in terms of content or in terms of intended effect. What does another "year" of "English" "do" for the student--or even more pointedly, for every student, regardless of his abilities, interests, or proposed educational/vocational choices? The policy which imposes requirements without clearly articulated specifications of both content and hoped-for results cannot be expected to have a high degree of educational effectiveness.

The more the higher standards movement in educational reform is examined, the more policy issues are uncovered. This is not at all to suggest that the idea of greater expectations and more stringent standards is basically flawed--far from it. The educational system is quite clearly in need of such reform; teachers support it; the public demands it. It is precisely because it is so desirable, so necessary, that the educational policies underlying this whole segment of the entire reform movement needs such examination, even though the examination forces the asking of some very probing and troublesome questions. For example, once the policies and the programs for higher standards are in place, what kind of assessment is going to be made to determine whether the expectations and requirements have been met?

Assessment

If the assessment or evaluation program undertaken measures essentially rote learnings and simple recall (as is unfortunately true of many testing programs now in place), then what happens to the higher

level learnings that are usually considered to be of the greatest importance? The question becomes especially troublesome if the testing is done on a statewide basis to assure uniformity, comparability, and "accountability". Such "state testing programs" do not have to be fact only testing, but the sheer magnitude of the task tends to rule out any more discerning and sensitive kinds of evaluation, keyed at least in part to individual needs and differences.

Non-performers. As expectations are raised and standards for course completion, grade promotion, and school graduation set at higher levels, it's a pretty sure bet that an increasing number of students just aren't going to make it. A sound educational policy which calls for more stringent academic requirements is also likely to have to make some provision for the non-performers. It is also almost frightening to examine some proposed local and state standards for high school completion, proudly and sincerely set forth as an exemplification of the pursuit of excellence in education, and to realize as one applauds the expectations that not every student is going to be able to come up to them.

Some would dismiss this problem with the easy assumption that the slower students just need more time--that everyone is capable of mastering the content of the required curriculum, given enough student time and teacher patience. Others would contend that simply by differentiating teaching methods and/or providing varied instructional materials, it will be possible for every student to achieve "excellence".

It is doubtless true that adjustments in time, methods, and materials will alleviate some of the problems, but fundamental educational policy alterations may also be necessary. None of the policy

alternatives is wholly satisfactory. Providing for different levels of curricular difficulty suggests discriminatory tracking. Different kinds of diplomas for different levels of academic achievement suggest invidious class distinctions. Just faking it--allowing social promotions on the pretense that certain acceptable levels of accomplishment have been reached when, in fact, they haven't--is patently dishonest. So the choice is one of the lesser of evils; but the only choice not available is no policy at all to provide for those students who simply are not going to reach the adopted academic standards.

The equity issues. One of the most baffling of the educational policy issues which has only rarely been faced as decision-makers have moved rapidly to pursue excellence is the equity issue. Can we have both quality and equality, excellence and equity?

Sure we can, comes the brashly confident reply; just make both quality and equality priorities! Noble idea, but the difficulty is that the rhetoric doesn't solve the problem--the problem being that the current moves for greater expectations and higher standards in education are going to work hardship not only on individuals but on entire groups whose academic performance abilities are hampered by long histories of deprivation or discrimination. To put it more directly, the inner-city youngster from a destitute broken home, living without any psychological support from either home or culture, with no role models, with no expectation or hope of academic success, is unlikely to do very well with general biology, so how far will he get with physics and chemistry? Or what will the required "fourth year of English" do for a student who

comes from an environment where English is not the common language, or where non-standard English is the standard for the culture and the community?

Educational policy which proposes and adheres to inflexible academic standards in the name of promoting excellence is a noble ideal, one to be pursued vigorously in the long run. But for the immediate future? If we are to preserve the equity gains we've made in education in the last two or three decades, educational policy is almost surely going to have to be adaptive to the special needs of special groups. Perhaps the clearest way to envision what appropriate policy would be is to suggest that this policy make a clear distinction between equality of educational opportunity--which can assuredly be provided--and equality of educational results--which is beyond the province or the ability of the educational system to provide.

II. Breaking the Lock-Step Salary Schedule

Among the proposals for educational reform common to most of the reform reports, none has elicited greater public applause than the suggestion that teachers should be compensated on some basis other than hours of credit and years of service. Educators may have been generally less unanimous than has been the general public in supporting this move, but the strength of educator support for some sort of differentiated pay scale has been surprisingly strong, not only among administrators, but among some large and influential teacher groups as well.

The general concept of differentiated compensation for teachers seems to make enough sense and to have commanded such a high level of enthusiastic support from legislators, the business community, and the general public, that it is not surprising that some form of this differentiation has become one of the cornerstones of most statewide efforts directed toward educational reform. A general consensus of "Let's do it!" has emerged, especially at the legislative and state board levels, but the ramifications of such a general policy, and the sometimes subtle consequences of different kinds of salary differentiation, do not always seem to have been completely thought through.

One of the problems rests with the proliferation of schemes and terminologies. Plans have been designated, not always clearly, by various names: merit pay, master teacher, differentiated staffing, career ladder, and "output measures", the last being essentially a plan for paying teachers according to the successful (or unsuccessful) performance of their students on standardized achievement tests. This

proliferation of terms makes it difficult enough to sort out the policy issues involved, but an even more serious problem arises when a policy is enunciated which calls for adoption of one or another of the schemes without a clear statement of basic purpose.

Policy motivation. When a state task force proposes--or a state board or a legislature mandates--a plan to pay teachers in some fashion other than by a single salary schedule, the motivation for such action may not always be clear, even to those who support the move. Is it primarily to force out the incompetent/mediocre teachers? Is it to make teaching more attractive to higher quality candidates? Is it to retain the better teachers in the profession? Is it to keep teachers in the classroom by providing an alternative to administrative level promotion? Is it calculated to improve educational effectiveness? Perhaps, of course, it is a combination of several of these purposes, but unless those who promulgate the move have clearly established in their own minds the relative priority they attach to the several hoped-for outcomes, the general policy provides little basis for selecting a particular plan.

Projected effect on instructional improvement. Perhaps the most important reason for trying to alter the traditional pattern for paying teachers--in the long run and the final analysis--is to improve educational effectiveness. The shortcut solution, then, would seem to be to use an output measure system--pay teachers according to how well their students perform. Sounds reasonable--but there are some rather obvious problems. If "performance" is equated with test scores, and the tests cover only (as they frequently do) the more routine kinds of book

learning, teachers will almost inevitably teach to the test, even if unconsciously. The other goals of education--affective learnings, personal development, vocational orientation, citizenship, and others--may well be neglected. Furthermore, student performance is so heavily affected--even determined--by native ability, socio-economic status, cultural factors, handicapping conditions, and just plain student ambition and effort--that it seems hardly fair to make significant (and often long-term) determination of individual teacher effectiveness on the basis of student performance.

So, until we get better output measures more directly traceable to how well the teacher has performed, differentiating salary on the basis of student test scores does not seem to be very supportable. Perhaps, it is often then suggested, we should try to get at the teacher's "output" by identifying which are the "best" teachers.

Merit Pay and Master Teacher. Identification of the best teachers is usually presumed possible through one of two means, or sometimes a combination of both. The first is to test teachers through some sort of standardized instrument; those who show on the test the highest level of knowledge about their subject matter and the teaching of it are presumed to be most meritorious. The other method is to have "objective" judgements made about the teacher's worth and quality by some individual or groups of individuals: Administrators, peer groups of colleagues, out-of-district evaluators, or some other designated judge or judges. Eligibility for consideration may be established through self-nomination or through nomination by peers, students, administrators, parents--the permutations are numerous. Whoever wins in the competition is designated worthy of "merit pay" or, alternatively, becomes a "master teacher".

Some specialists--purists?--may well object to lumping together "merit pay" and "master teacher" concepts; the two, it must be admitted, are not precisely identical. But they have so many common features that the policy issues--and the likely policy consequences--are much the same. Any scheme which attempts to decide individual merit is likely to have rough sledding. First of all, the very term "merit pay" conjures up images of favoritism, administrative machinations, sychophant teachers, internecine rivalries replacing teacher cooperation and collaboration--just imagine any bad results, say the opponents, and that's what merit pay will bring!

Master teacher is a more acceptable term. "Master" has a good solid ring to it; it implies an outstanding level of performance--doing something exceptionally well, not just "possessing" meritorious qualities. But, unfortunately, master teacher programs may turn out to be essentially a euphemism for merit pay plans. Master teacher programs are quite possibly going to inherit all of the unfortunate baggage that merit pay schemes have been carrying around for years, including but not limited to suspicions of favoritism and favor-seeking; disagreements about who will evaluate on what basis (who's going to bell the cat?); and--perhaps most serious of all--the fact that the plan almost inevitably means that there will be a limited number of teachers who get the coveted designation--an elite group that the other teachers can't join.

Differentiated staffing. If one of the aims of establishing a general policy which seeks to break the single schedule lock-step is to open up opportunities for all teachers, perhaps a plan which emphasizes

what you do rather than how good somebody judges you are offers teachers better possibilities. The details of differentiated staffing plans are not our subject here (any more than are the details of merit pay and master teacher plans); what is of interest here is the possible range of outcomes of a policy which is based on job assignment.

Briefly--and typically--teachers in a district with a differentiated staffing plan may be recommended for or may apply for an assignment which goes beyond just regular classroom teaching--and hence one which removes them from the single salary schedule. The change might be from that of a regular teacher to one who accepts responsibility for specified supervisory responsibility (with, say, student teachers, interns, or probationary teachers). Or the staff position might involve responsibility for curriculum development, textbook or electronic media evaluation and use, or any other specialized assignment. The person so chosen--who would presumably have the appropriate professional qualifications and skill levels--would be paid appropriately for the differentiated position held. There would not necessarily be limits on the numbers of teachers involved, because all staff positions would be open to differentiation of assignment.

Career ladder plans. In simplest form, career ladder plans are something like differentiated staffing plans in providing compensation differentiation appropriate to specific, precisely described levels on a ladder of different teaching careers for which the teacher can qualify by choice.

What makes the career ladder scheme such an attractive policy choice is that it has good potential for both public and professional acceptance; its start-up can be spread over a considerable period of time

(since it is a ladder, not an all-at-once event, making it easier to fund, to start, and to continue); it can potentially involve the entire staff; and it allows for a great deal of individual choice.

One of the prime elements of choice--especially appropriate in but not restricted to the career ladder plan--is the opportunity to have some choice of an extended contract. Being able to offer teachers employment for ten or eleven months, rather than the standard nine, affords an attractive way to increase teacher salaries on a very rational basis.

All in all, the differentiated staffing and career ladder plans may not be "better" than merit pay and master teacher programs, but they may well provide more attractive educational policy options.

In Conclusion

Educational policy options are choices-to-be-made, not doctrines-to-be-followed; therefore, any discussion of policy options that is conclusive or directive is probably wrong-headed. Yet, analysis of policy issues and policy options available in instituting programs for the reform of education, across the board or in specific areas, would appear to be a useful exercise if it clarifies the assumptions being made, examines the probable consequences of options chosen, and gives rational purpose to the directions being taken.